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To teach students how to write in a contemporary style, a secondary-school English teacher must be able to describe adequately the kind of writing he expects. Since many modern writers frequently ignore the guidelines proffered in traditional writing handbooks, the "new rhetoric"--a descriptive approach to composition that substitutes objective, verifiable data for traditional rules--can be of immediate practical value to the teacher in describing contemporary writing models. An analysis of a paragraph from Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder," based on such quantitative descriptions as frequency counts of words, sentence length, modal varieties and repetitions, and grammatical and rhetorical constructs, indicates that Bradbury almost entirely ignores most traditional advice and achieves his effect through a "cumulative" layering that builds the paragraph sentence-by-sentence in a manner similar to the phrase-by-phrase construction of a sentence. By leading students through such an analysis of contemporary writers and then devising suitable exercises based on the principles discovered in the models, the teacher can clearly and exactly guide his young writers in the process of composition. (LH)

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The Growing Edges of Secondary English

Essays by the Experienced Teacher Fellows at the University of Illinois 1966-1967

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THE NEW RHETORIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR SECONDARY TEACHING

by FRANK J. D'ANGELO

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What is the new rhetoric and what is its relevance to the secondary school teacher of English? Acording to Richard Ohmann, "*the* new rhetoric has yet to appear," but "there is no shortage of new ideas about rhetoric." [1] Wayne Booth concedes that "we seem to be in the midst of a revival of rhetoric unmatched in the twentieth century," but, he adds, "The revival, here again, must do more than echo the past." [2] Young and Becker believe that "there has as yet been no comparable change in rhetoric. That is, there has been no change which includes both a complete theory and an explicit practical method." [3] And Martin Steinmann, Jr., in his Foreword to *New Rhetorics* states that "it is by no means certain that a new rhetoric has appeared," but "it is certain that more and more scholars—linguists, psychologists, and philosophers, for example—are contributing to new rhetorics." [4]

In view of these assertions, then, why should the secondary school teacher of English concern himself with the so-called new rhetoric? In fact, why should he concern himself with rhetoric at all? In this essay I will try to answer these questions, as well as to give some notion of just what the emerging new rhetoric may be, and to propose that although we do not have anything like a complete theory for it (in fact, the idea of a "theory" might be complete anathema to the new rhetoric), we do have an explicit, practical method which is indeed relevant to the secondary school teacher of English.[5]

[1] Richard Ohmann, "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric," *College English*, XXVI (October 1964), 18.

[2] Wayne C. Booth, "The Revival of Rhetoric," *PMLA*, LXXX (May 1965), 8–11.

[3] Richard E. Young and Alton L. Becker, "Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution" in *New Rhetorics*, ed. Martin Steinmann, Jr. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 85–86.

[4] Steinmann, Foreword, *New Rhetorics*, p. iii.

[5] I am indebted to Leslie Whipp of the University of Nebraska for many of the following ideas.

DESCRIPTIVE RHETORIC

What, then, is the new rhetoric? The new rhetoric is a descriptive approach to writing rather than a prescriptive one. It substitutes objective, verifiable data about writing for traditional rules. Perhaps the person most responsible for this formulation is Professor Francis Christensen of the University of Southern California, who has proposed that teachers should first look carefully at writing before they begin telling their students what writing is.[6]

Unlike the descriptive approach to writing suggested by Professor Christensen, traditional approaches to composition in the past have largely been concerned with the study of theory and precepts and principles. These approaches, however, have not been too helpful because the language used seemed to be language about nonexistent entities in unlocatable places. In addition, the precepts offered have been highly artificial, not only because for the most part they have been too prescriptive, but also because most of the time they simply do not correspond to the way our best modern writers actually write.

For example, the following "rules" have quite frequently been proffered in traditional rhetorics and writing handbooks: never use a sentence fragment in place of a sentence, i.e., a group of words supposedly expressing a "complete" thought; never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*; do not use *however* or *therefore* as coordinate conjunctions; always "write" with nouns and verbs, not with modifiers; instead of writing long, involved sentences, use two or more shorter ones; remember that complex sentences (grammatical) are the mark of a mature style whereas simple sentences (grammatical) are the mark of an immature style; avoid periodic sentences; vary sentence beginnings; do not place undue reliance on the subject-verb pattern (the sign of an immature style); always put main ideas into independent clauses and subordinate ideas into dependent clauses; use a topic sentence to begin a paragraph. Precepts such as these could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. Now the trouble with this advice is that it is more often honored in the breach than in the observance. Even a casual look at contemporary writing will reveal that our best writers do not write this way.

Francis Christensen's examination of modern narrative and descriptive prose has shown that the noun and the verb, rather than being the most important components of a sentence, are merely the base on which the meaning of a sentence will rise, and it is the *modifier*, par-

[6] Francis Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," in *The Sentence and the Paragraph* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966), pp. 1–7.

ticularly the sentence modifier, that is the essential part of a sentence. Composition, then, "is essentially a process of *addition*." [7] Christensen also has indicated that it is not true that simple sentences (grammatical) are the mark of an immature style while complex sentences (grammatical) are the mark of a mature style. Simple sentences may express very complex ideas by the process of addition. Besides these observations, always arrived at inductively, Christensen has discovered that the subject-verb pattern is very common among modern writers and that the most common sentence openers are either simple adverbs or adverbials. Further, he has found that such coordinating conjunctions as "and" and "but" are frequently used as sentence openers.[8] And James Sledd in his analysis of contemporary writing suggests that the "traditional theory of clauses is simply untenable." Subordinate clauses are subordinate grammatically, but principal or main clauses frequently do express subordinate ideas.[9] According to the evidence, then, many of our prescriptions are obsolete and need to be revised.

An important characteristic of the new rhetoric, quantitative descriptions, relates more appropriately to style. According to Louis T. Milic, most descriptions of style have been impressionistic rather than empirical, and consequently they have been misleading. Consider, for example, the use of contradictory adjectives among different critics to describe the style of the same author (Jonathan Swift): "charming, clear, common, concise, correct, direct, elaborate, energetic, graceful, hard-round-crystalline, homely, lucid, manly, masculine. . . ." Milic continues that such impressions more accurately describe the response of the reader than the style of the writer. What is needed, he concludes, are "only quantitative descriptions." [10] By quantitative descriptions Milic probably means such things as frequency counts of words, sentence length, sentence levels, lexical signals, modal varieties and repetitions, grammatical and rhetorical constructions, etc.

The explicit, practical method of the new rhetoric, then, as proposed by Francis Christensen and others, is this: that description precedes prescription and that quantitative descriptions should precede qualitative descriptions, for it is on the basis of accurate quantitative analysis that our qualitative evaluations should be made. Therefore, if we want our students to become better writers, we must first raze

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[8] Francis Christensen, "Notes toward a New Rhetoric," in *The Sentence and the Paragraph*, p. 9.

[9] James Sledd, "Coordination (Faulty) and Subordination (Upside-Down)," in *New Rhetorics*, p. 181.

[10] Louis T. Milic, "Metaphysical Criticism of Style," in *New Rhetorics*, pp. 164–166.

the traditional rhetorical structures, the prescriptive rules, and upon the leveled ground we must rebuild an edifice which is consistent with descriptive approaches to writing. We must replace answers with questions, and we must replace rules with careful examination and analysis.

A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

As an example of the kind of descriptive approach I mean, I would like to analyze a paragraph taken from a story by Ray Bradbury, titled "A Sound of Thunder," and thereby to provide at least one working model for rhetoric as a descriptive study. To do this I will make use of the methodology provided by Christensen as well as my own.

"A Sound of Thunder" is one of the selections in a Bradbury collection entitled *The Golden Apples of the Sun.* In the story, Bradbury creates a vivid description of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

> It came on great oiled, resilient, striding legs. It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest. Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior. Each thigh was a ton of meat, ivory, and steel mesh. And from the great breathing cage of the upper body those two delicate arms dangled out front, arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys, while the snake neck coiled. And the head itself, a ton of sculptured stone, lifted easily upon the sky. Its mouth gaped, exposing a fence of teeth like daggers. Its eyes rolled, ostrich eggs, empty of all expression save hunger. It closed its mouth in a death grin. It ran, its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, its taloned feet clawing damp earth, leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight. It ran with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its ten tons. It moved into a sunlit arena warily, its beautifully reptile hands feeling the air.[11]

This paragraph consists of twelve sentences; the sentences vary in length from eight words to thirty-four words. As a way of illustrating sentence length, I have numbered the sentences consecutively from one to twelve, and I have included the total number of words contained in each sentence in parentheses: 1 (8); 2 (24); 3 (33); 4 (11); 5 (34); 6 (14); 7 (10); 8 (11); 9 (8); 10 (26); 11 (16); 12 (14). The only conclusion I would like to draw thus far from the observable data is that this variety in sentence length contributes to the overall rhythmic movement of the prose. The reader can test this rhythm for himself

[11] Copyright 1952, 1953 by Ray Bradbury. Reprinted by permission of Harold Matson Company, Inc.

by reading the passage aloud. He is probably already aware of the sense of monotony that a paragraph containing sentences of almost equal length will produce.

The sense of rhythm in this selection is also increased by the use of repetition of introductory parallel constructions.

> *It came* on great oiled, resilient, striding legs.
> *It towered* thirty feet above half of the trees . . .
> *It closed* its mouth in a death grin.
> *It ran* with a gliding ballet step . . .
> *It moved* into a sunlit arena warily . . .

In addition, the repeated use of present participles in the active voice contributes to the overall rhythmic effect.

> *folding* its delicate watchmaker's claws
> *exposing* a fence of teeth like daggers
> *crushing* aside trees and bushes
> *clawing* damp earth
> *leaving* prints six inches deep
> *feeling* the air

This combination of sentence length, repetition of parallel elements, and use of active participles to describe motion calls up a sharp image of the action in the reader's mind. The movement of the prose describes the very motion of the beast itself and thus contributes to the total effect.

Francis Christensen has provided a graphic way of illustrating the "layers of structure" of sentences by indenting the word groups of a sentence and numbering the levels. Notice, for example, the cumulative effect of the sentence modifiers or layers of structure in sentence 2.[12]

> 1 It towered thirty feet above half of the trees,
> 2 a great evil god, (NC)
> 3 folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest. (VC)

This is an example of what Christensen calls a "cumulative sentence." The additions or sentence levels move backward to modify the main clause; the main clause, together with its internal modifiers (i.e., those modifiers such as adjectives, prepositional phrases, etc., which are not sentence modifiers), advances the movement of the prose forward.

The method of determining the sentence levels is relatively simple. The main clause provides the initial level; the sentence modifiers provide the sublevels or layers of structure. The above example is a

[12] Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," pp. 4–6.

three-level sentence, with the second level subordinate to the first and the third level subordinate to the second.

Christensen's conception of the main clause is quite different from the traditional one. The main clause consists of the main subject and verb together with all restrictive modifiers including restrictive subordinate clauses. The sentence modifiers are nonrestrictive modifiers which are usually set off by punctuation and which provide the basis of the subsequent sentence levels or layers of structure.

The symbols included in parentheses after each modifier are based on structural linguistic classifications and indicate the grammatical nature of the levels of addition: NC, *noun cluster* (the noun and its modifiers); VC, *verb cluster* (the verb and its modifiers); AC, *adjective cluster* (the adjective and its modifiers); Abs, *absolute construction* (the nominative absolute, including its modifiers).

Although this sentence is a simple sentence in terms of the traditional classification of sentences, it is anything but simple in terms of movement, levels of generality, and texture. The front-shifted modifiers advance the movement of the prose forward; the sentence modifiers move backward toward the main clause. The two movements set up a rhythm described by Christensen as "ebbing and flowing." The addition of the structural levels increases the concreteness of the description and adds density to the texture. (Texture simply means those elements added to the nouns or verbs or main clauses.)

The following are additional examples of cumulative sentences numbered according to sequence in the paragraph:

3

1 Each lower leg was a piston,
  2 a thousand pounds of white bone, (NC)
    3 sunk in thick ropes of muscle, (VC)
    3 sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior. (VC)

6

1 And the head itself, /, lifted easily upon the sky.
  2 a ton of sculptured stone (NC)

7

1 Its mouth gaped,
  2 exposing a fence of teeth like daggers. (VC)

8

1 Its eyes rolled,
  2 ostrich eggs, (NC)
  2 empty of all expression save hunger. (AC)

10

1 It ran,
  2 its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, (Abs)
  2 its taloned feet clawing damp earth, (Abs)
    3 leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight. (VC)

11

1 It ran with a gliding ballet step,
  2 far too poised and balanced for its ten tons. (VC)

12

1 It moved into a sunlit arena warily,
  2 its beautifully reptile hands feeling the air. (Abs)

The examples chosen illustrate the number of levels as well as the range of constructions used in the lower levels. Sentence 3 is a three-level sentence; but the third level consists of two parallel constructions. Sentence 6 is a two-level sentence; sentence 7, a two-level sentence, etc. In other words, sentence levels can be subordinate to the main clause, subordinate to each other, or coordinate to each other. A sentence containing a combination of coordinate and subordinate levels is called a *mixed sequence sentence.*

Up to this point, the reader might object to what may seem like an undue preoccupation with style and structure. It appears as if the content has been neglected. But in a narrative-descriptive paragraph it is by the accumulation of details, sentence levels, repetition, sentence length, and word choice that the author is able to focus our attention on a single subject: a huge, terrifying dinosaur, overwhelming, evil, moving through the jungle with tremendous speed and power.

Bradbury uses precise descriptive words and figures of speech to create the effect. To increase the reader's sense of horror, the beast is depicted as snakelike. It has an "oily reptilian" chest as well as a "snake neck" which is "coiled." It is also depicted as being cold, mechanical and impersonal, with "watchmaker's claws," legs like pistons, and "pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior." Examples could be multiplied, but the cumulative force of the descriptive phrases can best be shown by isolating them from their context and then regrouping them both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Size and Power

great . . . striding legs
towered thirty feet
leg . . . a piston
leg . . . a thousand pounds of white bone
bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle
thigh . . . a ton of meat, ivory, and steel mesh

great breathing cage of the upper body
arms dangled out front
head . . . a ton of sculptured stone
pelvic bones crushing

Horror and Repulsion

great evil god
oily reptilian chest
snake neck
fence of teeth
teeth like daggers
eyes . . . empty of all expression
death grin

Cold and Mechanical

watchmaker's claws
reptilian chest
leg . . . a piston
a thousand pounds of white bone
gleam of pebbled skin
thigh . . . ivory, and steel mesh
cage of the upper body
head . . . a ton of sculptured stone
reptile hands

Balance and Poise

delicate . . . claws
two delicate arms
head . . . lifted easily
a gliding ballet step
poised and balanced

Not only is the choice of details extremely effective in terms of the description, but the manner in which the details are arranged in space is also especially well done. This spatial arrangement can best be shown by grouping the sentences in much the same way as the levels of structure within individual sentences were previously grouped. Again, the methodology is Christensen's.[13]

1 It came on great oiled, resilient, striding legs.
1 It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest.
  2 Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior.
  2 Each thigh was a ton of meat, ivory, and steel mesh.

[13] Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," in *The Sentence and the Paragraph*, pp. 24–32.

2 And from the great breathing cage of the upper body those two delicate arms dangled out front, arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys, while the snake neck coiled.

2 And the head itself, a ton of sculptured stone, lifted easily upon the sky.

3 Its mouth gaped, exposing a fence of teeth like daggers.

3 Its eyes rolled, ostrich eggs, empty of all expression save hunger.

1 It closed its mouth in a death grin.

1 It ran, its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, its taloned feet clawing damp earth, leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight.

1 It ran with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its ten tons.

1 It moved into a sunlit arena warily, its beautifully reptile hands feeling the air.

This kind of graphic representation reveals a number of interesting things: the organization of the paragraph, the structural relationship of the sentences, and the logical description in space—first, moving from a large view of the dinosaur to a close-up of its various parts and, second, organizing a description of the parts by starting with the lower legs of the dinosaur and then working up.

This paragraph can be considered a macrosentence; it is organized in much the same way as the "cumulative" sentence, and it exemplifies the same structural principles. It is a sequence of sentences which are related to one another by coordination and subordination. The paragraph might be described as a *mixed sequence paragraph*, that is, one containing both coordinate and subordinate sentences. Sentences 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, and 12 are coordinate, having identical subject-verb structures at the beginning. Sentences 3, 4, 5, and 6 are parallel to each other but subordinate to sentence 2. Sentences 1 and 2 give us an overall view of the dinosaur, whereas sentences 3, 4, 5, and 6 narrow down to a close-up view of the various parts, the lower legs, the thigh, the upper body, and the head. Sentences 7 and 8 are parallel but subordinate to sentence 6. They further refine the description of the head. Finally, the beast is again revealed on a larger scale, moving off into the distance.

The paragraph does not have a topic sentence as such, but the first two sentences act as the organizing sentences of the paragraph. The fact that the first sentence begins with the word *it* reveals that it is dependent on a previous sentence. The paragraph is unified by the achievement of a single effect. Coherence is achieved by the repetition of coordinate structures, the dependence of the subordinate

structures upon the coordinate, and the use of transitional devices. In sentences 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, and 12, the simple repetition of the pronoun *it* to refer to its antecedent provides the connecting links. In sentences 5 and 6, the conjunction *and* is used as the transitional device.

It is interesting to note that Ray Bradbury seems to ignore much of the traditional advice given in the writing handbooks. The paragraph does not have a topic sentence. Sentence beginnings have little or no variety: six sentences begin with the word *it*; two begin with the word *each*, two with the word *its*, and only two with what can properly be termed a sentence opener. (These begin with the word *and*.) Ten sentences begin with the subject-verb pattern, and two begin with coordinate conjunctions. Only two of the sentences are complex sentences; the rest are simple. But, as I have already pointed out, the sentences have a complexity of structure that cannot be understood in terms of the traditional classifications.

At this point a note of qualification is necessary. The foregoing does not represent *the* explicit, practical method of the new rhetoric but only *one* working model which may be valuable in some situations. However, the general methodology is clear; the approach is one based on observation, close analysis, and, for the most part, quantitative descriptions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Once the teacher has led the student through this kind of analysis, he would then devise suitable exercises, based on the principles discovered in the models chosen for study. In connection with the model presented in this paper, the exercises would consist in having the students write sentences of varying levels, beginning naturally enough with two-level narrative or descriptive sentences and then adding more complex levels, including coordinate levels, mixed-sequence levels, etc.[14] The teacher, rather than emphasizing inverted sentences and complex grammatical openings, would encourage the writing of the common subject-verb-complement pattern. Sentence openers stressed would be simple adverbs or adverbials. Coordinating conjunctions as sentence openers and as links between sentences would be perfectly acceptable; the teacher's job would be to teach the accurate use of these conjunctions. Exercises emphasizing variety in the length of sentences, the

[14] Some useful exercises have been developed by Francis Christensen for the Nebraska Curriculum. See especially *The Rhetoric of Short Units of the Composition—Grade 10.*

use of parallel structure, and the choice of vivid and precise words would also be suitable for student imitation.

For the study of the larger pattern of the paragraph, similar exercises would be devised, stressing the paragraph as a sequence of structurally related sentences consisting of coordinate, subordinate, and mixed sequences. There would be no difficulty in relating these same concepts to expository paragraphs. The principle is the same; the only difference is that, instead of adding narrative or descriptive details to the initial sentence of the sequence, the sentence sequence would include those items necessary for the development of expository paragraphs: examples, reasons, definitions, expansions, etc. It is even conceivable that entire compositions may be structured in exactly the same way—that is, that compositions may be considered sequences of structurally related paragraphs in much the same way that paragraphs are conceived of as sequences of structurally related sentences. But I would not like to press the issue; clearly, some compositions are. A sound procedure would be the use of a descriptive methodology for determining the essential pattern of these larger units.

To return now to my original question, what are the implications of the new rhetoric for the secondary school teacher of English? I think by now the answer should be evident. To be effective teachers of composition, we must first be descriptive rhetoricians. We ourselves must first try to describe the kind of language that we want our students to imitate. Therefore, we should view our main role as teachers of composition as that of directing our students' observations and analyses and of devising exercises for their imitation. To do this, perhaps we will have to improvise our own systems of describing writing. In this manner we not only will increase our own understanding of the writing process but will also be able to lead our students to a process of discovery which can only come about by a close analysis and description of the writing itself.

Perhaps the general approach of the emerging new rhetoric has best been summed up by Leslie Whipp in a lecture given at the 1966 NDEA Nebraska Institute in English. At that time he remarked:

> If one thinks of a descriptive rhetoric in terms of a codified body of descriptive generalizations, then one is obviously thinking in terms of what may be possible five hundred years from now, after prodigious labors by dedicated rhetoricians. But if one thinks of a descriptive rhetoric in terms of a system, in terms of a series of questions, in terms of a habit of mind, in terms of the conceptual grammar of statements in rhetoric, then one is thinking in terms of what is possible for you now, and for your students.